9 Stretches for Sciatica Pain Relief

Medically reviewed by Amy Elizabeth Wolkin, PT, DPT, MBA — Written by David Heitz and Erica Cirino — Updated on February 2, 2024

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Sciatica pain begins in your lower back and moves down the legs. Some moves can help relieve the pain. These can include a seated glute stretch and a standing hamstring stretch.

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What is the sciatic nerve?

Sciatic nerve pain can be so excruciating and debilitating that you don't even want to get off the couch. You probably know more than one person

with this condition, as it's relatively common, with a lifetime incidence of 10-40 %.

The sciatic nerve begins at your lower back and then moves through your hips, buttocks, and down each of your legs. Sciatic pain will usually follow the path of the sciatic nerve in the affected leg. It happens when there's a compression or irritation of a nerve anywhere along this pathway.

Common causes of sciatica can include:

- a ruptured disk
- narrowing of the spine canal (called spinal stenosis)
- injury

Sciatic pain can also happen due to a condition called piriformis syndrome. Your piriformis muscle extends from your buttocks at the edge of your spine all the way to the top of your thigh at the back. Sometimes this muscle can spasm and trap the sciatic nerve, which is located nearby. This can result in sciatic pain.

Licensed physical therapist Mindy Marantz says that sciatica pain can occur for a variety of reasons. "Identifying what doesn't move is the first step toward solving the problem," she explains. Often, the most problematic body parts are the lower back and hips.

Dr. Mark Kovacs, a certified strength and conditioning specialist, adds that the best way to alleviate most sciatica pain is to do "any stretch that can externally rotate the hip to provide some relief."

Here are 9 exercises that do just that:

- sitting glute stretch
- sitting spinal stretch
- basic seated stretch
- Figure 4 stretch
- knee to opposite shoulder
- forward pigeon pose
- standing hamstring stretch
- standing piriformis stretch
- scissor hamstring stretch

1. Seated glute stretch

In the seated glute stretch, you sit cross-legged.
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1. Sit on the floor or a chair with your legs out in front of you.
2. Bend your right leg, putting your right ankle on top of the left knee.
3. Lean forward and allow your upper body to reach toward your thigh.
4. Hold for 15-30 seconds. This stretches the glutes and lower back.
5. Repeat on the other side.

2. Sitting spinal stretch

In the sitting spinal stretch, turn to your side to help relieve pressure on the sciatic nerve.
Gif by Active Body Creative Mind.

Sciatica pain is triggered when vertebrae in the spine compress. This stretch helps create space in the spine to relieve pressure on the sciatic nerve.

1. Sit on the ground with your legs extended straight out with your feet flexed upward.
2. Bend your right knee and place your foot flat on the floor on the outside of your opposite knee.
3. Place your left elbow on the outside of your right knee to help you gently turn your body toward the right.
4. Hold for 30 seconds and repeat three times, then switch sides.

3. Basic seated stretch

While stretching each leg in the basic seated stretch, remember to keep your back straight.
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You begin this stretch by sitting down on a chair and crossing your painful leg over the knee of your other leg. Then follow these steps:

- Bend forward with your chest and try to hold your spine straight. As long as it's not painful, try to bend over a bit more. Stop if you feel any pain.
- Keep this position for 30 seconds and repeat the exercise with the other leg.

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4. Figure 4 stretch

The figure-4 stretch can help stretch the piriformis muscle.
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The figure-4 stretch can help you open your hips. There are multiple versions of this stretch, but for purpose of relieving sciatic nerve pain, you can follow the following directions:

1. Lie flat on your back and bend both your knees.
2. Cross your right foot over your left thigh, moving your legs up toward the torso.
3. Hold the position for a moment and then repeat on the other side

It's important not to force this stretch. Instead, allow gravity to bring your legs closer to your body more naturally, achieving a deeper stretch.

5. Knee to the opposite shoulder

The knee to opposite shoulder stretch is done while lying flat on your back.
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This simple stretch helps relieve sciatica pain by loosening your gluteal and piriformis muscles, which can become inflamed and press against the sciatic nerve.

1. Lie on your back with your legs extended, and your feet flexed upward.
2. Bend your right leg and clasp your hands around the knee.
3. Gently pull your right leg across your body toward your left shoulder. Hold it there for 30 seconds. Remember to pull your knee only as far as it will comfortably go. You should feel a relieving stretch in your muscle, not pain.
4. Push your knee, so your leg returns to its starting position.
5. Repeat for a total of 3 reps, then switch legs.

6. Standing hamstring stretch

To do the standing hamstring stretch, begin by standing, and place your right foot on a higher surface, like a chair.
Gif by Active Body Creative Mind.

This stretch can help ease pain and tightness in the hamstring caused by sciatica.

1. Place your right foot at or below your hip level on an elevated surface. This could be a chair, ottoman, or step on a staircase. Flex your foot, so your toes and leg are straight. If your knee tends to hyperextend, keep a slight bend in it.
2. Bend your body forward slightly toward your foot. The further you go, the deeper the stretch. Don't push so far that you feel pain.
3. Release the hip of your raised leg downward as opposed to lifting it up. If you need help easing your hip down, loop a yoga strap or long exercise band over your right thigh and under your left foot.
4. Hold for at least 30 seconds, then repeat on the other side.

7. Standing piriformis stretch

You can hold your hands on your hips for extra balance while in the standing piriformis stretch.
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This is another standing stretch that can help with sciatica pain. You can do this without support if you're able, but it can be hard to balance. Instead, you can also stand against a wall and place your feet about 24 inches from the wall.

- Put your painful leg over the knee of your other leg while standing. Bend your standing leg and try to make the number 4 with your hips lowered to the ground at a 45-degree angle.
- Bend your waist and swing your arms while holding your back straight. Stay in the position for 30-60 seconds.
- Switch legs and repeat.

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8. Scissor hamstring stretch

By bending down in the scissor hamstring stretch, you can reduce the pressure of the hamstring muscles on the sciatic nerve.
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The ischial tuberosity, also known as the sit or sitz bones, begins at the ischium, which is one of the parts that make up the pelvic girdle along with the ilium and the pubis.

The hamstring muscles attach to the ischial tuberosity via the sacrotuberous ligament (STL). When they are tight, hamstring muscles may mimic sciatica symptoms.

This stretch can help loosen those hamstring muscles, helping relieve their pressure on the sciatic nerve. It may help to do this exercise daily.

- Place your right foot about 3 feet behind your left foot.
- Pull your hips forward and push your shoulders back, but your right hip shouldn't be farther forward than your left hip. A mirror may help make a judgment on this.
- Put your hands on your hips. You may use a chair for balance if you need it.
- Push your torso a bit over your front leg by bending your waist while keeping your back straight. Keep your weight on your front leg.
- Keep this position for 5 to 10 seconds, then repeat the stretch with the opposite leg. Do the stretch for each leg 3 to 5 times.

9. Forward pigeon pose

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Begin this version of the pigeon pose by getting on your knees on the floor, facing down.
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1. Kneel on the floor on all fours.
2. Pick up your right leg and move it forward on the ground in front of your body. Your lower leg should be on the ground, horizontal to the body. Your right foot should be in front of your left knee while your right knee stays to the right.
3. Stretch the left leg out all the way behind you on the floor, with the top of the foot on the ground and toes pointing back.
4. Shift your body weight gradually from your arms to your legs so that your legs are supporting your weight. Sit up straight with your hands on either side of your legs.
5. Take a deep breath. While exhaling, lean your upper body forward over your front leg. Support your weight with your arms as much as possible.
6. Repeat on the other side.

Exercise with care

Kovacs emphasizes that you shouldn't assume that you'll be as flexible as the exercises ideally call for. "Don't think that because of what you see on YouTube or TV, you can get into these positions," he says. "Most people who demonstrate the exercises have great flexibility and have been doing it for years. If you have any kind of pain, you should stop."

Corina Martinez, a physical therapist at Duke Sports Medicine Center and member of the American Medical Society for Sports Medicine, says that there's no one-size-fits-all exercise for people who have sciatic nerve pain.

She suggests adjusting the positions slightly, such as pulling your knees in more or less and noticing how they feel. “If one feels better, that is the treatment you want to pursue,” she advises.

Martinez says that anyone experiencing even mild sciatic nerve pain for more than a month should see a doctor or physical therapist. They may find relief by having a treatment plan including home exercise program to address their challenges.

> The first line of intervention for sciatica should definitely be physical therapy because it is active, it is educational, and the primary goal is to restore function and make each patient independent.
>
> The clue is to find experienced, manual trained physical therapists who combine an understanding of alignment, movement, and therapeutic exercise, and who set up a clear plan of care to reach measurable goals. After that, what’s left is to actively participate in the program!
> — Mindy Marantz, PT, MS, GCFP

Frequently asked questions

Can you get rid of sciatica by stretching?

Stretching exercises may help manage sciatica, but you’ll need to work with a qualified healthcare professional to ensure you know how to do the exercises safely. In time, symptoms improve in 80–90% of cases, and stretching can support recovery.

What are 4 exercises for sciatica pain?

Some seated exercises that may help improve sciatica pain include glute stretch, sitting spinal stretch, and basic seated stretch. Standing stretches like the scissor hamstring stretch can also help manage sciatica.

What are the best stretches to get rid of sciatica?

Your sciatica management plan may include a combination of seated, standing, and lying down stretches. For example, this may include the seated Figure 4 and basic seat stretches, the pigeon stretch, and the standing piriformis stretch. It’s best to work with a healthcare professional to develop the best stretching program for you.

What is the 30-second stretch for sciatica?

There is no specific 30-second stretch for sciatica. Several stretches could be held for up to 30 seconds, such as the seated glute stretch, the sitting spinal stretch, and the knee to the opposite shoulder stretch.

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How to Ease Sciatica Without Surgery

Medically reviewed by William Morrison, M.D. — Written by Sarah Dalton — Updated on February 3, 2023

Symptoms Risk factors Good news Improve strength
Increase flexibility Medications Alternative treatments
Heat and cold therapy Outlook

Sciatica can often be relieved non-surgically within a matter of weeks. Working to improve your back and core strength while increasing flexibility throughout your hips and lower body can significantly help.

Sciatica describes pain that radiates down the back of the thigh and into the lower leg. It may be caused by irritation of one or more of the lower spinal nerves.

The pain can be mild or severe and often develops as a result of wear and tear on the lower spine.

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Symptoms

The symptoms of sciatica can vary from a mild ache to excruciating pain that radiates along the pathway of your sciatic nerve, which runs from your lower back down past your hips and into each leg. These symptoms can include numbness, tingling sensations, or muscle weakness that travels down the back of your thigh and into your calf or foot. It's often worse with coughing or sneezing. Typically, people affected with sciatica will experience symptoms on only one side of the body. Although the pain may be severe, sciatica can most often be relieved through physical therapy, chiropractic and massage treatments, improvements in strength and flexibility, and the application of heat and ice packs.

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Risk factors

There are many factors that can leave you susceptible to sciatica, which affects both athletes and those who are less active. People who lead a sedentary lifestyle are more likely to develop sciatica than active people. However, endurance athletes are also prone to experiencing sciatica from overworked and stiff muscles.

Age is also a significant factor, as those between the ages of 30 and 60 often experience age-related degeneration in their spine, including herniated disks, bone spurs, and joint dysfunction in the hips. Obesity and diabetes are other common contributors, according to the Mayo Clinic.

The good news

A physical therapist can help you to determine whether sciatica can be relieved through conservative methods such as chiropractic adjustments, static stretching, and cold therapy. Most people respond well to simple techniques and are pain-free within a matter of weeks. Chiropractic adjustments and massage therapy may help improve the alignment of your spine and address other underlying conditions while also improving blood circulation and muscle relaxation. Minor pain can also be treated with the application of heat and cold.

While some doctors may recommend surgery as a treatment for sciatica after noninvasive measures have failed, experts say it's not always the right choice for everyone. In fact, according to the Cleveland Clinic, nearly 50 percent of people with sciatica report their symptoms improving within 1.5 months of their diagnosis. Nonsurgical treatments may include a longer period of recovery. However, surgery comes with its own risks, which include infection and blood clots. It's important to talk with your doctor about your sciatica to determine which treatment is best for you.

Improve core and back strength

The musculature around your spine and abdomen may be weak or overly tight, preventing it from supporting your body as needed. Poor posture and compromised muscles can impact the alignment of your spine, increasing your risk for lower back pain and sciatica. Gentle strengthening exercises that target your core and back will improve your posture and ability to respond to stress, reducing the likelihood and severity of back pain. While you're recovering from sciatica, you may want to avoid high-impact exercises, such as running and plyometrics.

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Increase hip and hamstring flexibility

Stiff hamstrings, glutes, and hips can alter your posture and increase the stress on your lower back, which may contribute to sciatica. Most types of sciatica will benefit significantly from a stretching routine that targets the hips and hamstrings and relieves an overused or inflamed piriformis muscle. The piriformis is a small muscle that attaches at the base of the spine and runs just above the sciatic nerve. Prolonged inactivity or sitting compresses the piriformis over the sciatic nerve, which can lead to aggravation and pain. Reverse the effects of tight hips and hamstrings by adopting a simple stretching routine or incorporating yoga into your overall fitness regimen.

Here are two ways to stretch your piriformis muscle and relieve pain.

Stretch 1

1. Lie on your back with both of your knees bent and your feet on the ground.
2. Lift one leg and cross it just above your knee.
3. Hold the thigh of the leg with the foot on the ground and pull up to your chest until you can feel the stretch in your buttocks.
4. Hold for 10 to 30 seconds.
5. Repeat on the opposite side.

Stretch 2

1. Lie on your back with both legs straight out.
2. Hold one knee with your opposite hand and pull your knee up and over to the opposite shoulder.
3. Hold for 10 to 30 seconds.
4. Repeat on the opposite side.

Learn more: 5 Things to know about the piriformis stretch »

Medications

Physical therapy is often the first line of treatment for sciatica. However, if your symptoms don't improve, your doctor may recommend you take medications. The most common types of drugs prescribed for sciatica pain include:

- anti-inflammatory drugs
- muscle relaxants
- narcotics
- epidural steroidal injections
- tricyclic antidepressants
- antiseizure medications

Anti-inflammatory drugs can reduce inflammation and sciatica symptoms. They can include nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) such as ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin) and naproxen (Aleve, Naprosyn). They also include COX-2 inhibitors, which stop pain by blocking hormones in the body.

Muscle relaxants loosen muscles tightened up by sciatica, and narcotics help to ease sciatica pain. Epidural steroidal injections can also reduce pain. With this option, a corticosteroid and anesthetic numbing drug are inserted into the space between two vertebrae.

Tricyclic antidepressants and antiseizure medications can sometimes effectively treat sciatica, although it's not their primary purpose.

Off-label drug use is when a drug that's been approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for one purpose is used for a different purpose that it hasn't been approved for. However, a doctor can still use the drug for that purpose. This is because the FDA regulates the testing and approval of drugs, but not how doctors use drugs to treat their patients. So, your doctor can prescribe a drug however they think is best for your care.

Learn more: What you need to know about off-label prescription drug use »

Chiropractic, massage, and acupuncture treatments

Alternative treatments for sciatica can also provide some pain relief. A chiropractor can adjust your spine in a way that increases spinal movement, which improves spine function and decreases pain. Chiropractic treatment can also relieve lower back pain caused by sciatica, but is less effective for radiating pain.

You may have tight muscles as a result of sciatica pain. Massage can help loosen up your muscles, alleviating some pain and improving mobility and flexibility.

Some research suggests that acupuncture can help relieve sciatica. If you're interested in acupuncture, be sure to visit a licensed practitioner.

Using cold and heat to alleviate sciatica pain

When you first start experiencing sciatica pain, applying a cold pack can provide a lot of relief. Wrap a cold pack or a bag of frozen peas in a clean towel, and apply it to the painful area a few times a day for up to 20 minutes each time.

If your sciatica is still bothering you after a few days, then it can be helpful to try heat instead. Apply a heat lamp on the lowest setting, a hot pack, or a heating pad to the painful area.

If your pain persists, try alternating between cold packs and hot packs.

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Outlook

Sciatica is a painful condition that can make everyday life more challenging. The good news is that there are a lot of ways to treat it, and many of them are quite effective at reducing symptoms. Talk with your doctor to determine which treatments are best for you.

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